

Even before you cross
the bridge to Hilton
Head Island, you
get the feeling. This
is a unique place.
Everything just seems
so “right.”

an Island Unto Itself

By Laura Lewis

That’s because Hilton Head Island is an island with a plan. From its earliest development, Hilton Head Island has been resolute in its pursuit of creating a laid back atmosphere with minimal ecological impact.

In the midst of expansive development, “HHI” as it’s known has worked hard to preserve its beach, waterways, trees and heritage – the things that lure vacationers back to the foot-shaped barrier island year after year.

Measuring 12 miles long and five miles wide, Hilton Head possesses a rich history dating back as early as 8000-1000 B.C., as documented at the island’s Coastal Discovery Museum, when Native Americans are known to have visited the area seasonally. European explorers followed from 1500-1700, then the plantation era from 1700-1860.

During the first half of the 20th century HHI, named for English sea captain William Hilton, remained much an island unto itself, with electricity arriving in 1950 and its first bridge in 1956. Led by visionary developer Charles Fraser, a master-planned community, Sea Pines, was laid out at the south-end of the island that incorporated and preserved the island’s natural endowments. After that,

the fledgling resort community gradually began to boom. Fifty years later, its leaders are still governed by these environmentally sensitive covenants and have held a tight rein where development is concerned.

The island is known for its strict laws regarding protection of trees, appearance and architecture. Businesses must follow a rigid code regarding signs, and neon isn’t allowed.

“It’s the first ecologically planned destination in the country,” says Charlie Clark, director of communications for the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce and Visitor and Convention Bureau.

Buildings can be no taller than five stories high, and there are no streetlights. The philosophy behind that is so “you’ll be able to see the stars at night,” Clark explains. “It also benefits the sea turtles venturing to the island each year to lay eggs.”

Hilton Head is renowned for its array of activities and diversity. “People are coming

not just from all over the country but from all over the world to live,” says Hilton Head Mayor Tom Peeples. “I think that is one of the elements that really makes Hilton Head Island special.”

The beach, he said, differentiates the island from the rest of the state, in addition to its natural beauty—“just the marshes, trees and wildlife.”

Activities on Hilton Head run the gamut, from bicycling, golf and tennis to kayaking and dolphin excursions. “It’s an amazing thing,” Clark said. “Take the first trip of the day, and the water is like glass with dolphins racing near your boat, and you can sometimes spot bald eagles on shore. Really, you want to take in the ecology of the area, and kids as young as 5 can kayak. Anyone can do it.”

More than 250 restaurants dot the island, as well as more than 200 shops—“everything from upscale art galleries to outlet malls,” Clark said.

The island is also starting to gain appreciation for its rich history, says Emory Campbell, who grew up on Hilton Head and conducts Gullah Heritage Trail Tours.

Hilton Head also offers a variety of cultural activities, including fine art, theatrical and musical venues.

The beach is still the biggest draw, as more than 2.5 million visitors now venture to the island annually.

“We’re just going to keep on doing what we’re doing – protecting the environment and keeping it a great place to live,” Peeples said.



Find out more...

Hilton Head Island - Bluffton Visitor and Convention Bureau
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